



## Forum: Citizens want open government

By NANCY CASSIS

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Taxpayers of Michigan are weary of the status quo. They have lost patience with inefficient government bureaucrats who seem incapable of solving problems and are unwilling to share vital information with the elected representatives of the people.

It's time to bring greater sunshine to the decision-making process.

That's why I have reintroduced a comprehensive package of bills that would bring more transparency to Michigan government. They passed the Senate last session and deserve swift enactment by both chambers.

We can no longer be kept in the dark when critical decisions are under way. Taxpayers will benefit from laws that are more comprehensive and accurate; businesses will profit by gaining access to information on tax credits; and legislators will be able to make informed decisions on tax policy based on factual, reliable data.

Many of us learned a great deal during the lengthy debate about overhauling Michigan's business tax system. If lawmakers are unable to verify data or to access critical information when writing bills, even well-meaning legislation can be inaccurate or incomplete.

Requiring disclosure of this information can help avoid unintended consequences.

Senate Bill 70 will require the Department of Treasury to share aggregate tax information by business category with the chair of the Senate Finance Committee, the chair of the House Tax Policy Committee and the directors of the House and Senate fiscal agencies.

My measures do not deal with specific information on individuals.

SB 72 would require Treasury to create and post on its Web site a database detailing all Michigan Business Tax credits available to businesses, how many companies are claiming the credits and how much is claimed annually.

Another proposal, SB 71, would specifically require that the Michigan Economic Growth Authority (MEGA) annual reports include:

- The actual number of jobs created by MEGA recipients;
- The actual amount of capital investment made by the credit recipients; and
- The actual value of the tax credit claimed by companies receiving MEGA tax credits.

The measure also requires the auditor general to audit the MEGA report before it is submitted to the Legislature.

This essential package of bills will help ensure that a system of checks and balances is in place. Open, transparent government provides for appropriate disclosure.

But an open process is only a start. Once armed with useful data, policymakers must have the courage to make the tough choices. By avoiding the day of reckoning, Michigan has failed to fix the state's long-term structural problems and exacerbated the budget shortfall.

It's time to get our house in order. Instead of making budget decisions in one room and tax policy choices in another, we need to get under one roof and devise a coordinated policy.

The first step to a more effective government is transparency. President Obama has already signed executive orders to make the process more open. Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox has been a leader on this issue.

In summary, making Michigan's government transparent, open and effective will enhance credibility with the public.

About the author: State Sen. Nancy Cassis is chair of the Senate Finance Committee and represents Michigan's 15th Senate District in Oakland County.

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